

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Species: Greater Sandhill Crane
Region: 5 and 4 – Central and Pacific Flyways
Hunting District: 586-01 permit area
Year: 2020

1. **Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).** See Table 1 for applicant, special license, and harvest history.

The proposal is to increase the number of available 586-01 sandhill crane licenses from 50 to 70.

Current:

586-01: 50 licenses. Valid only in Golden Valley, Wheatland, and Meagher Counties and that portion of Sweetgrass County north of I-90.

Proposed:

586-01: 70 licenses. Valid only in Golden Valley, Wheatland, and Meagher Counties and that portion of Sweetgrass County north of I-90.

Table1. Sandhill crane license applicants, permitted hunters, and estimated harvest in 586-01 area, 2001-2019.

Year	Applicants	# Permitted Hunters	# Permits issued	Estimated retrieved harvest
2019	92	50	100	30
2018	62	50	100	27
2017	76	50	100	21
2016	60	50	100	27
2015	49	50	98	28
2014	53	50	100	30
2013	49	50	100	21
2012	43	50	100	14
2011	35	50	100	25
2010	45	50	95	21
2009	37	50	94	27
2008	30	50	60	3
2007	44	50	44	10
2006	22	40	22	1
2005	30	35	30	10
2004	32	35	32	4
2003	38	35	35	11
2002	37	50	37	1
2001	37	45	37	10

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective of the proposed change is to increase hunter opportunity to harvest sandhill cranes in the 586-01 permit area. Sandhill crane hunting is a unique opportunity that is much appreciated by hunters, judging by the comments received. Hunter interest in crane hunting is increasing. In 2001 there were only 37 applicants for this crane hunting area. In 2019, there were 92 applicants for this opportunity (Table 1). Crane numbers are high and relatively stable (Table 2). This proposed permit increase is not large enough to reduce crane populations, but it will provide more hunter opportunity.

In some localized areas, crop damage from cranes can be a concern during the fall. This moderate increase in crane licenses may help landowners address those situations if or when they occur.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

Sandhill crane populations will continue to be monitored by annual aerial surveys. This proposal is not expected or intended to reduce the crane population. Over the last 4 years, we've averaged 27 cranes harvested annually on 100 licenses. Increasing to 140 licenses may result in a harvest increase of perhaps 10 to 15 cranes annually. Harvest success on the licenses will be monitored through the regular sandhill crane harvest survey. Comments from hunters are also part of that survey, and their comments regarding access issues and general satisfaction with their crane hunting will be a part of the evaluation of the proposed change.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

The USFWS's nationwide objective for the Rocky Mountain Population (RMP) of greater sandhill cranes is 17,000 – 21,000 birds, and the population has been stable to slightly increasing. The total number of greater sandhill cranes surveyed in 2019 was 21,290. A portion of the RMP is found in Montana during the fall hunting season. Montana's greater sandhill crane harvest has typically been well below the maximum amount allocated to the state. For example, in 2019 the state harvest was 56 percent of our allocation, and in 2018, it was 36 percent. There is no population objective for the number of sandhill cranes found in the 586-01 during the fall hunting season. A total of 1,664 cranes were observed during the 2019 aerial survey. From 2013 to 2019 observed crane numbers have averaged 1,699 (Table 2).

Table 2: Greater sandhill crane September survey results for the 586-01 permit area:

Year	Number of Cranes
2019	1,664
2018	1,355
2017	1,273
2016	1,670
2015	2,257
2014	1,998
2013	1,673
Average	1,699

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Weather and vegetation conditions are not factors related to this proposal.

Most crane hunting opportunity in this area is found on private lands. No increased conflicts with landowners are expected. A few accessible state sections also provide opportunity. Some private lands frequented by cranes during the hunting season are enrolled in Block Management. Many of the landowners that have sandhill cranes on their property during the fall allow sandhill crane hunting. We anticipate hunters will be able to find access to hunt cranes if they put in some pre-season scouting and landowner contact effort.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

No landowners or sportsmen's groups have been contacted about this proposal. Given the increased number of crane hunting applicants in recent years, it's expected that hunters would be supportive of the proposal. No opposition from landowners is anticipated. The local wildlife biologists who overlap this crane hunting area, Ashley Taylor, Jay Kolbe, and Justin Paugh, have been consulted. All were supportive of the proposal.

Submitted by: Justin Paugh, Wildlife Biologist – Big Timber, James Hansen, Central Flyway Migratory Bird Coordinator-Billings.

Date: March 26, 2020

Approved: _____
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by: _____
Name / Date

Reason for Modification: